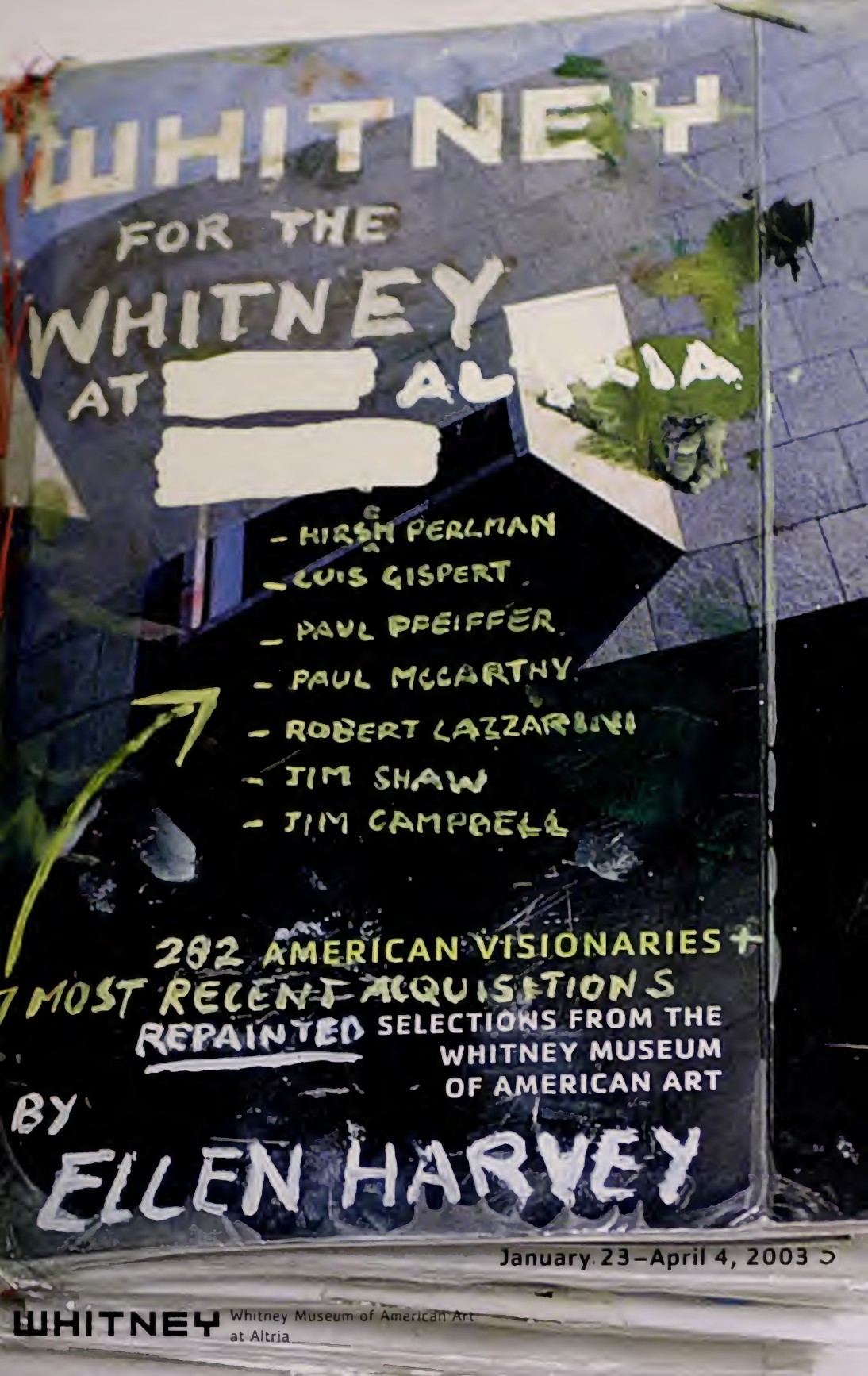

WHITNEY
FOR THE
WHITNEY
AT
- HIRSH PERLMAN
- LUIS GISPERT
- PAUL PFEIFFER
- PAUL MCCARTHY
- ROBERT LAZZARINI
- JIM SHAW
- JIM CAMPBELL
282 AMERICAN VISIONARIES +
MOST RECENT ACQUISITIONS
REPAINTED SELECTIONS FROM THE
WHITNEY MUSEUM
OF AMERICAN ART
BY
ELLEN HARVEY
January 23–April 4, 2003
WHITNEY
Whitney Museum of American Art
at Altria

I really like to give people what they want. I like to think about what everyone wants, to determine desires implicit in the situation and make them explicit. But it's like that saying, Be careful what you wish for.
—Ellen Harvey

Like any public institution, a museum has a specific identity, often determined by its size or location, by the types of exhibitions it shows, and by the work that it collects and maintains. One of the ways a museum communicates this identity to the world is by developing a descriptive catalogue that allows viewers an overview of the major works in its collection. This is a necessarily subjective formulation: there is no quantifiable way for the work to be chosen, but rather, like an exhibition, one relies upon the expertise of the museum professional to present the work meaningfully within the catalogue. The selection of work in a collection catalogue can function as a snapshot in time, telling its own story of art historical interpretation, incorporating new ways of thinking about older pieces and presenting works that the museum has more recently acquired.

The second exhibition in the ongoing series *Contemporary Artists on Contemporary Art* (for which contemporary artists are invited to create new work to be shown alongside their selections from the Whitney's contemporary collection), Ellen Harvey's installation

Ellen Harvey, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria*, 2003 (installation view of gallery entrance taken on January 24, 2003)

A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria (2003) is constructed around the Museum's recently published collection catalogue. An enormous gold frame, with the exhibition title painted overhead, borders the granite doorframe of the gallery at the branch Museum. To enter, the viewer must step over the frame and into the space beyond, effectively entering the picture. Before even opening the doors to the gallery, the viewer has engaged a critical aspect of Harvey's project, which literalizes multiple definitions of a frame: "a structure made for admitting, enclosing, or supporting something," "to give expression to," or "to fit or adjust to something in order to achieve a desired outcome or interpretation." The Whitney collection catalogue, titled *American Visionaries*, is the Whitney's metaphorical frame for itself, a presentation of the iconic images that in turn define the Museum's most current vision of its identity.

Passing through Harvey's gold frame, the viewer enters a room constructed within the gallery made of 10-foot-high panels bearing painted copies of each of the 394 images featured in *American Visionaries*. Though painted directly onto the panels, the copies appear to hang salon-style. Roughly following the alphabetical ordering in the catalogue, each copy is scaled twice as large as its printed image. Rectangular openings in the panels reveal artworks—the actual objects, rather than painted copies—placed behind the walls at seven

points. Hung as in a typical gallery, they are only visible in their entirety when the viewer stands extremely close to the corresponding cutout frame. The seven works—by Jim Campbell, Luis Gispert, Robert Lazzarini, Paul McCarthy, Hirsch Perlman, Paul Pfeiffer, and Jim Shaw—were the most recent acquisitions in the Whitney's collection at the time of the project's inception, barring several that were necessarily excluded because of size or condition constraints. Distancing herself from the selective act of curating by basing her "choices" on an objective process—albeit an arbitrary one—Harvey further emphasizes the temporal nature of institutional presentation, a snapshot of selection at the moment of the catalogue's publication.

The viewing frames that look onto the new acquisitions are approximately the same scale as the hundreds of painted images on the constructed walls, effectively integrating the objects beyond within the overall selection. While the painted copies are easily accessed by the viewer, however, the recent acquisitions remain physically unattainable and enticingly difficult to engage. The forced distance from the works and the seductive act of peering at them through the diminutive, shadowboxed openings in the panels places the viewer in the role of voyeur. The pristine hanging of the originals calls attention to the minor imperfections of Harvey's copies—the numerous smudges and drips that mar the white surface of the panels and reveal the process of their creation. The recent acquisitions are presented simultaneously as precious, protected objects—the only ones permitted a physical presence—and as outside the institutional canon represented by the copies.

Initially daunted by the enormous research binders of the contemporary collection and the charge of site-specificity, Harvey's first impulse was to construct an exhibition comprising works that address institutional critique and the process of collecting—works that ironically become reappropriated by the system they are critiquing once they become part of an institution's collection. Uncomfortable with the curatorial process this necessitated, Harvey realized that the collection catalogue had already done this work—already determined, in a sense, what the Whitney is. Using that publication as her source, the artist's focus is centered on viewers and their desires with respect to the specific space of the branch Museum. Harvey's engagement with traditional processes, such as painting, is partially an attempt to investigate media seen by some in the art world to be less relevant than newer technologies. More significantly, painting is Harvey's way to access a more popular conception of art and explore its function for the broader public. "My work," Harvey states, "is an often futile attempt to deconstruct clichés of art production in order to understand or reveal their continuing hold on the popular imagination despite all their apparent obsolescence."[1]

Both the painted copies and the windows that look onto the original works are numbered in concordance with the battered copy of the catalogue used to paint the replicas, which sits on the central bench in the gallery for viewers' reference. Like the panels, the swollen and tattered catalogue bears the marks of the artist's process: the entire book was clearly unbound into individual sheets, then reconstructed and edited to include the recent acquisitions and the works that were logistically unusable for Harvey's project. In addition to providing basic information about each original work, including the artist's name, dimensions, and the media used, the catalogue allows the viewer to function as a critic, to compare the original image to the painted copy—underscoring both the artist's obvious skill and the tremendous labor involved, as well as the impossibility of creating an exact replica.

Representation in its many meanings is the crux of the investigation proposed by Harvey's project and a theme frequently engaged in her previous work. As with most compelling conceptual work, Harvey's installation is deceptively simple in concept; its deadpan cleverness and blunt obviousness belie the depth of its complex investigation of representation and perception. What the artist has referred to as a "poetic visual joke" and an "act of complete megalomania" is also a rigorous, obsessive engagement with the politics of selection, display, and the communication of meaning.

The multiplicity of framing in the piece refers beyond its site-specificity to how art is contextualized. *A Whitney for the Whitney* plays off the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

paintings commissioned to record an art collection that functioned simultaneously as factual communication, educational tools, and subjective interpretative artworks in their own right. Reproductions of two familiar examples, Johann Zoffany's *Tribuna of the Uffizi* (1772–78) and Samuel F.B. Morse's *Gallery of the Louvre* (1831–33), serve as endpapers for Harvey's reconstituted catalogue. By following the catalogue selection and ordering of the works, Harvey avoids the explicit compositional framing found in collection paintings of the past, in which the artist selected both the specific objects and their placement within the scene. Additionally, Harvey's concern with the notion of accessibility, coupled with the Whitney's position as a public institution and the branch Museum's status as a free, public space, led her to a significant modification of this historical practice. Instead of a two-dimensional representation, Harvey has constructed a painting that viewers enter physically, thus allowing them to be the subject of the piece, to occupy the place of a wealthy patron who owns the collection. The experience of walking into a painting is enhanced by the images having been painted directly onto the panels, rather than hung as individual objects on the walls. This "painting" in turn references a book, thus layering the fantastical suggestion of also being inside the catalogue.

As in many of her previous projects, Harvey's *A Whitney for the Whitney* is a deliberately inefficient, even illogical means to achieve her goal, its "implicit inadequacy" critical to the questions posed. While the historical collection paintings that inspired the project were necessarily created as paintings, this medium no longer occupies a place as the most accurate means of representation. Because photography allows for the existence of a far more convenient, efficient, and portable collection catalogue, Harvey invests the images chosen for her project with a sense of historical circularity by returning them to their previous state as cumbersome and inaccurate painted imagery.

Painted from photographs of the works rather than the original works themselves, the nearly four hundred copies are significantly removed from their source. Harvey further exaggerates this distance by translating them into yet another medium. The degree of separation becomes particularly ironic with conceptual or sculptural works, whose meaning resides in subverting a two-dimensional representation or a removal from the traditional aestheticized object to which they are now returned. Harvey's project builds on art historical

precedents such as Sherry Levine's deconstructionist copies of famous artworks that question the sacrosanct modernist notion of originality and the masterpiece, Louise Lawler's interrogations of institutional display and aesthetics commodification, and more recent work such as Vik Muniz's "paintings" of iconic artworks in untraditional media such as chocolate syrup or dust. Harvey's project wryly reveals these influences; works by Levine, Lawler, and Muniz appear in the catalogue, and are thus repainted into the installation. Harvey becomes a link in this conceptual lineage while simultaneously decontextualizing, aestheticizing, and, ultimately, reinterpreting her sources.[2]

Harvey maintains her own objective scale for each copy—twice that of its image in the catalogue—which calls attention to the fact that images in a book often have no relationship to the scale of the object that they represent. Yet despite Harvey's intent to create an unmitigated, recognizable copy of each image, even three months of fifteen-hour days and her considerable technical skill could not be enough to create a photo-realistic version of the Whitney catalogue.[3] Though consciously resisted, Harvey acknowledges that some evidence of the artist's presence is unavoidable. While the images convey photo-realism from afar, closer inspection (encouraged by the prescribed viewing of the recent acquisitions) reveals her hand in the visible brushstrokes, the slight inaccuracies, the smudges

here and there. These traces of her work remind the viewer that all images are a product of interpretation, no matter how objectively approached. Harvey allows the personal engagement with the work to be visible in imperfection, albeit astonishingly accomplished and visually overwhelming, thus celebrating "the idea that my consciousness, or my relationship to the whole thing, manifests itself as failure."

By emphasizing the notion of failure, Harvey's installation effectively examines its opposite: What makes an artwork successful, and to whom? The desires and expectations of the viewer are, to Harvey, far more interesting than those of the artist; the radical disjunct between the definition of good art and a "real" artist in the popular imagination with that of the art world insider figures prominently in her work. Largely unspoken among art professionals, this distance is the fulcrum of Harvey's approach. When considering the Whitney project, Harvey tried to isolate the interpretative underpinnings of art in the public realm, generally reducible to an interest in skill and aesthetics, from the prioritizing impulse of the art world, where conceptual depth trumps all. Harvey traces her interest in expectations of viewing and the desire for a particular notion of the artist to her own relatively recent transition to that identity. After an unsatisfying stint as a lawyer, she chose to pursue what she calls her "naive understanding of art as a locus of desire, a space of freedom where you can do anything you like." Given that popular conception, why, Harvey asks, isn't everyone an artist? Why is art accorded either an exalted and often elitist space in contemporary culture or relegated to a hobby? Why is the work of a Sunday painter not considered serious?

Like the Whitney exhibition, Harvey's *New York Beautification Project* (1999–2002) brought these ideas to bear on the question of site-specific public art. For the project, Harvey spent over one hundred days painting exquisitely rendered reproductions of archaic landscape paintings in degraded sites throughout the city that were already marked by graffiti—an illegal drawing or inscription made on a public surface—or had become de facto public spaces. Inserting an aesthetically appealing image of nature that, through its medium and process, signifies as art in the deteriorated urban landscape, Harvey's graffiti merged commonly held criticism of that practice as the province of subversive, chaotic youth with the widely appreciated tradition of genre painting. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani publicly stated his approval of the *New York Beautification Project*, citing it as the kind of public art the city should be supporting. Missing the conceptual point of the project, Guiliani brilliantly, if unintentionally, summarized the issues involved, focusing on the easily appreciated landscape paintings rather than Harvey's investigation of what is acceptable art. Even if he misinterpreted the intention of the work, the mayor's comment draws out an issue central to *A Whitney for the Whitney*: who has the authority to determine art's validity and value?

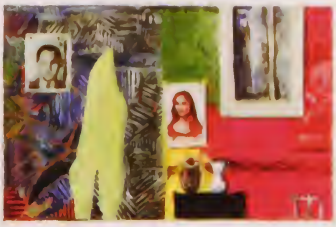
Investigating how artistic validity is determined is certainly not without substantial precedent in contemporary art practice. Harvey's stated goal of "giving people what they want" is the impetus behind Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid's painting *Most Wanted* (1995–97),

which asked the public—the future viewers of the work—to make certain compositional and formal decisions about the final product. This project used statistical data based on national responses to questions about aesthetic preferences to create a composite work of art. Ostensibly this artwork should have pleased everyone and, unsurprisingly, pleased none. Harvey's approach is perhaps less aggressive in making its point; her use of traditional media and imagery familiar to a broader public provides enticing means for viewers to engage their own desires concerning art and aesthetics. Simultaneously critiquing commonly held assumptions about art and artists, Harvey's work serves as a bridge between the often broad gulf that separates art and its public. Though Harvey is aware that each viewer will come away from the piece with different interpretations, she is committed to idea that "all dialogues are valuable to the artist." In a similar vein, for Harvey's 2001 performance *100 Free Portraits* the artist offered 15-minute pencil portraits to passersby near art institutions in exchange for a written evaluation of the finished work. Inhabiting a form of art production that is generally considered outside the realm of the "real" art world, Harvey's street drawings reinvest the viewer with a position of power regarding the artwork while simultaneously questioning how certain genres and processes are invested with, or divested of, legitimacy.

Harvey trains her rigorous, questioning eye equally on herself, on the art world and its institutions, and on history. For a recent project exhibited at the Frankfurt Art Fair, she repainted a very small tromp l'oeil version of the most well-known painting in the city's Staedal Institute of Art, Johann Tishbein's 1786 portrait of Goethe. The incongruity of the scale and style of Harvey's rendition, in contrast to the fair's largely contemporary fare, and its accompanying title *Not for Sale* (2002), functioned to reveal the way in which art fairs have increasingly cloaked their essential commercial nature in the high-quality rigor of a museum. While Harvey's work often gently mocks the conventions of different aspects of the art world, it steers clear of condescension or mean-spiritedness. The broad humor it evokes and the often awesome labor and aesthetic impact of her work allows her revelations to be a seduction into ideas rather than an aggressive didacticism.

Like the painted copies in *A Whitney for the Whitney*, Harvey's video *Seeing Is Believing* (2001) and her series of paintings titled *Low-Tech Special Effects* (1999–2000) address oft-unnoticed aspects of medium and representation. In the former, a split-screen image of a room is combined with an initially blank "screen" (actually an empty canvas) on which the side of the room obscured by the canvas is painted during the video's half-hour duration. While the finished piece appears to seamlessly present the full view of the room as seen by the artist, in reality Harvey created the painted half based on a live-feed television monitor at a different angle, which was needed to properly create the illusion of a whole. Like the Whitney installation, the final image is multiply removed from reality even while allowing the viewer to be enticed into the belief of accurate representation. By combining a technological medium (video) that is often accorded an indexical relationship to reality with an archaic form (painting) no longer given that representational authority, Harvey underscores our desire to privilege the eye, to believe what we see. Humorously engaging this same desire, the painted series *Low-Tech Special Effects* "recreates" seamless cinematic special effects in absurdly unconvincing ways, emphasizing the obsolescence of the painted medium. In the end, the primary appeal of the paintings is their process, the nostalgia and preciousness of the painted medium, rather than the medium's ability to evoke a fictional event so easily achieved on film. In a similar process, Harvey's attempt to create a perfect copy of the Whitney's collection catalogue reveals the perversity of claiming that painting can function as an accurate representation—in this case, of even another representation rather the original object.

Central to the Whitney installation, accuracy, likeness, and originality have been consistent themes throughout Harvey's work. Her series *I See Myself in You* (2000–01) consists of paintings based on Polaroids of two adult friends individually attempting to recreate photographs of the artist as a child. The theatricality of the original images, in which Harvey vamped and posed in typically childlike performances, underscores the nostalgia of the adult



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT CORNER: Window looking onto Luis Gispert, *Untitled (Three Asian Cheerleaders)*, 2001; painted replicas of Jasper Johns, *Racing Thoughts*, 1983. Art © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; Joe Jones, *American Farm*, 1936; and Joan Jonas, *Vertical Roll*, 1972

reenactments, what Harvey refers to as "double-faked self-portraits." The two recreations, painted together on a single panel, express the futility of any single interpretation and the aesthetic construction underlying all portraiture. This notion is also addressed in the Whitney piece, which is essentially one version of the institution's "portrait." In both projects, the source image is absent—there is no way to compare the final representation with its original and thus no way to truly determine accuracy. The frustration the viewer feels engaging a copy without an accessible comparison is, in the Whitney work, initially mitigated by the presence of the catalogue. Ultimately, however, the work suggests that the distance from an objective assessment is always insurmountable when looking at a reproduction.

Issues of institutional context, as seen in the Whitney installation, have also figured prominently in Harvey's other recent works. When the gallery Secession in Vienna invited the artist to recreate her *New York Beautification Project*, with typical sensitivity to context, Harvey saw immediately that it would resonate quite differently at that museum and in the pristine environment of the city. She decided to alter the project by painting the words "Bad Boy Klimt Lebt!" (German for "lives") in graffiti-style script on the outside and inside of the Secession building itself. The letters were filled in with excerpts copied from Gustav Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze* (1902), one of the Secession's best-known works by one of Vienna's most celebrated artists. As with the *New York Beautification Project*, viewers' responses during the painstaking days of painting were integral to the piece, as was its ephemerality (it was slated to be painted over after three months) and the counterintuitive practice of creating graffiti

from a highly valued historical image. An upcoming installation for the Princeton University Art Museum, for which Harvey will replicate one of their most highly valued collection paintings, similarly undermines the preciousness and exclusionary effects of institutional presentation. Though she will follow all of their restrictions on how to make a copy, designed to prevent the possibility of fraud or theft, once the replica is complete Harvey will "steal" the original work and display her own piece in its stead for the duration of the exhibition. The work—like the repainted images in the Whitney installation—will clearly not be the original, but will function as its doppelgänger, inaccurate and revealing its falsity, but nonetheless a richly layered simulation.

The Princeton project will ask the viewer to assess Harvey's copy against the original. What, if anything, keeps her piece from being better than the original work? In *A Whitney for the Whitney*, the artist has taken the question to its most extreme expression in a performance of simultaneous submission and arrogance. Can this installation, which Harvey calls "perhaps the world's most insanely derivative work," also fulfill an artist's desire for their work to be better than the celebrated works that preceded it? The intensely concentrated and obsessive relationship with the American art historical canon (as represented by the Whitney's collection) required to paint the piece creates a kind of poetic intimacy, making manifest the ever present agony of influence inherent to any creative endeavor.

Ultimately all of Harvey's work revolves around this complex and conflicted engagement with art, in which critique and commitment, cynicism and optimism, sincerity and ironic humor coexist. The circularity of making art about art in which the meaning of art is the questioning of its meaning takes on a progressive, almost transcendent note in Harvey's work. The sense of necessity, even compulsion, in her projects affords them a level of intensity that translates to all those who experience them. "I think of the space of art as being the space of obsession, of nonrational choices," the artist says. "You just decide to do it, like being in love with someone where you can only think 'I'll just keep going and at some point it will end or something will happen.'" *A Whitney for the Whitney* reflects this approach: "Obsession is in a way about a lack of choice—it *had* to be the whole catalogue, for example—a process that mimics the way I think being an artist just is. There is something beautiful to me about someone undertaking this question because they just decided to....How far can one go?"

1. Ellen Harvey, interview by the author, December 11, 2002. Unless otherwise noted, all the artist's quotes are from this same interview.

2. While much of Harvey's work centers on the idea of desire and expectation, her own aesthetic and conceptual preferences become curiously subverted. Aesthetics, she feels, should relate only to the point you're trying to express. In *A Whitney for the Whitney*, preference manifested itself in relationship to difficulty of reproduction: "I liked the ones without too much detail." Additionally, "there are pieces in there that I think are fabulous, but didn't enjoy painting at all because they were so labor intensive, and also there were pieces that I really love as pieces, but when you turn them into paintings, they completely lose what makes them good....Making them into paintings is kind of this terrible, reactionary thing to do to these poor works, where they suddenly become something that functions purely on this aesthetic level."

3. "I'm not sure there are brushes small enough to achieve that detail on this scale," the artist commented—a typical understatement that succinctly and modestly summarizes the impossibility of the project.

Biography

Born in Kent, England, Ellen Harvey lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She is a graduate of the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program and took part in the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center's National Studio Program. She was a 2002 recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts' Lily Auchincloss Fellowship for painting. Her work has been exhibited in one-artist exhibitions at De Chiara Gallery, New York, and in group exhibitions in such venues as the Queens Museum of Art, New York; Artists Space, New York; Secession, Vienna; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York; Apex Art, New York; and the Gwangju Biennale, Korea.

Artist Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Shamim Momin for inviting me to make a project for the series Contemporary Artists on Contemporary Art and for her unwavering support and encouragement. I would especially like to thank her for our many conversations, out of which the idea for *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria* was born.

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I would like to thank Laurie De Chiara and Sonke Müller of müllerdechiara in Berlin for their hard work and continuing support.

Finally, I would like to thank Thomas Campbell, my parents, and my sisters for all their love and encouragement.

The installation incorporates the following works from the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art

Jim Campbell, *Ambiguous Icon #5 (Running, Falling)*, 2000. LED and custom electronics, 22 x 29 in. (55.9 x 73.7 cm). Purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Committee 2001.128

Luis Gispert, *Untitled (Three Asian Cheerleaders)*, 2001. Fujiflex print mounted on aluminum, 40 x 72 in. (101.6 x 182.9 cm). Purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Committee 2002.141

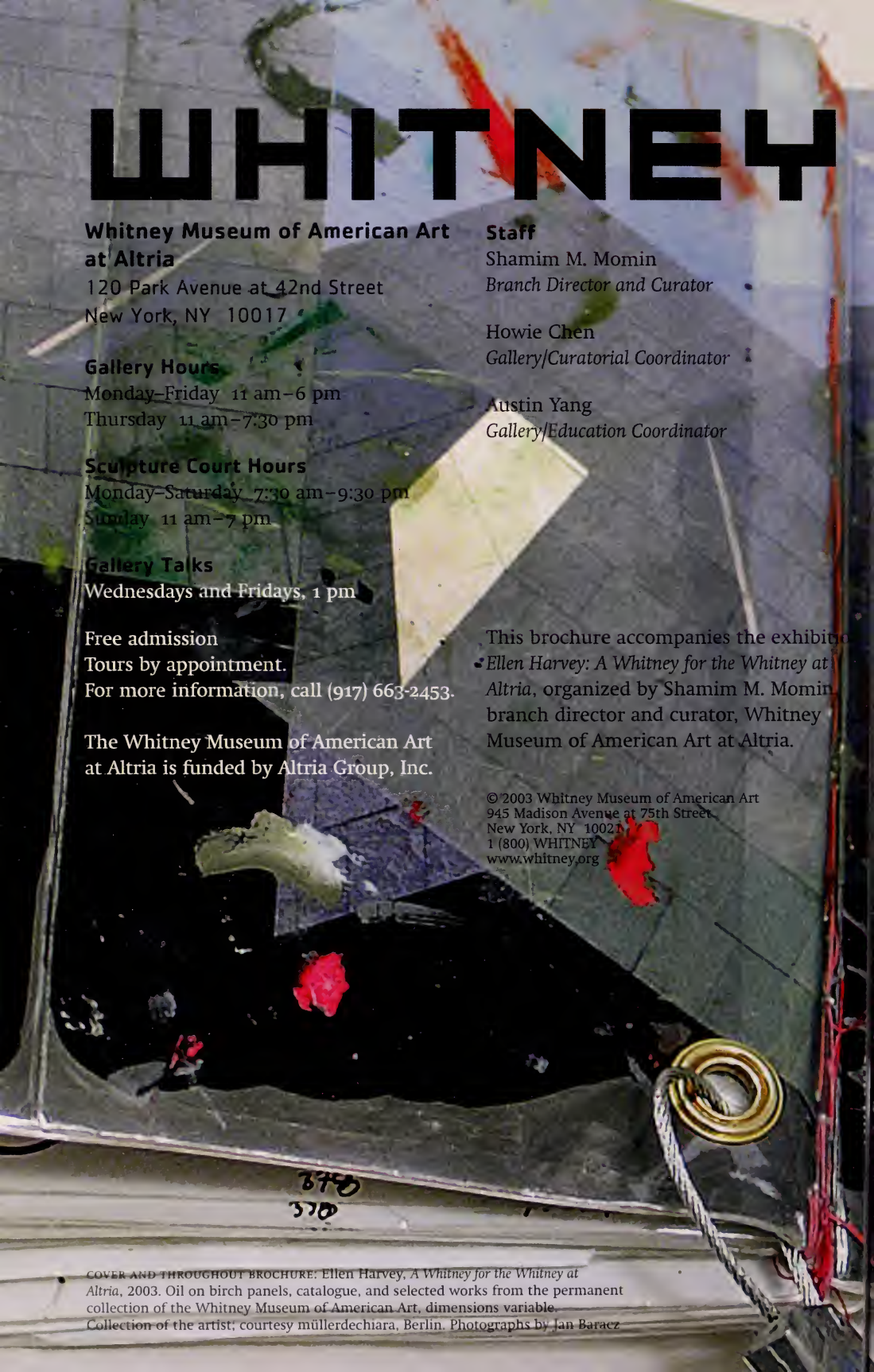
Robert Lazzarini, *Skulls*, 2000 (one of four skulls shown). Resin, bone, and pigment, approximately 14 x 8 x 8 in. (35.6 x 7.6 x 20.3 cm) each. Purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Committee and Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo 2001.137a–d

Paul McCarthy, *Dream Room, Interior Room*, 1970. Gelatin silver prints, 23 3/8 x 59 1/2 in. (59.4 x 151.1 cm). Purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Committee and Norah Sharpe Stone 2001.138.2

Hirsch Perlman, *Day 1.1*, 1998–2001. Gelatin silver print, vinyl tape, oil, and pushpins, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76.2 cm). Purchase with funds from the Photography Committee, the Contemporary Committee, and Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo and The Dorothea L. Leonhardt Foundation, Inc. 2002.166

Paul Pfeiffer, *Goethe's Message to the New Negroes*, 2001. Color LCD monitor, metal armature, DVD player, DVD image: 3 1/2 x 4 1/4 in. (8.9 x 10.8 cm); monitor, 5 x 6 1/2 x 2 in. (12.7 x 16.5 x 5.1 cm). Purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Committee 2001.227

Jim Shaw, *Primordial Toad*, 1990. Mixed media, 17 x 14 in. (43.2 x 35.6 cm). Purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Committee 2001.132



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This brochure accompanies the exhibition *Ellen Harvey: A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria*, organized by Shamim M. Momin, branch director and curator, Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria.

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COVER AND THROUGHOUT BROCHURE: Ellen Harvey, *A Whitney for the Whitney at Altria*, 2003. Oil on birch panels, catalogue, and selected works from the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist; courtesy müllerdechiara, Berlin. Photographs by Jan Baracz